

The Painter, the Rice Man and the Boater Hat

A Newnham College mystery

June 1911

Please do not take offence if this note does not apply to you but I am trying to contact the one person it does concern.

Dearest Ellie,

No trumpets signified that time had been torn open and stitched back together. Harriet and I were walking back to Peile when two figures appeared and ran across the road, narrowly dodging a bicycle. One was a wild-looking man carrying a large white sack over his shoulder, the other a young girl who carried a suitcase and clutched a straw boater to her head. We learned that the pair - Rob, locally known as the Rice Man, and Esther - had come from a backwater 1930s village. None of us knew how they had travelled through time. We snuck them into Newnham and Harriet moved her stuff into my room so that they could hide out in hers until they found a more permanent solution, or a way back. Before retiring to bed, we called on them. I started when the door opened, so great had been Rob's transformation from Rice Man to Gentleman. In fact, he reminded me of someone else, a student named Sebastian to whom I had intended to introduce Harriet. It was then that I saw the photograph on the floor. I saw it only briefly but the intimate figures it depicted bore a striking resemblance to Harriet and Sebastian, or Harriet and Rob.

The following Tuesday, I was working through some example sheets when you discovered Harriet, dead, and screamed. Knowing Harriet's room would likely be searched, I rushed to warn our time-travelling friends but arrived to discover them gone. I first assumed providence had withdrawn them to their own time but then I noticed something that made me doubt: the girl's hat. I had never seen her without that hat. I returned to the body and found a note there, reading:

Bring £200 to The Pickerel Inn by Friday or more will die.

Certain that the time travellers' disappearance was connected to Harriet's death, I hurried back to my friend's room to search for clues. I picked up the photograph and dropped it in the next breath. It was not Harriet but me. Perhaps the photograph had been taken in a future which Harriet's death had extinguished. My musings were interrupted by the police who insisted upon laying Harriet's body in her bed until it could be removed.

That evening, I was making my own cautious way to the bathroom when I collided with a tall man carrying a familiar, white sack.

'Rob! You're still here.'

‘Yes, I hid when I heard the scream; an unfamiliar man is suspicious.’

‘Where’s Esther? I saw her hat earlier but...’

‘I don’t know,’ Rob said. ‘It’s possible she panicked and ran when she heard the scream. I’m going to search but she might come back to your room so please, look after her if she does.’

‘Of course,’ I nodded. Rob put a hand on my shoulder.

‘Something’s bothering you.’

‘You have a photograph of me and Sebastian, or possibly me and you, you two look so similar.’

‘Who’s Sebastian?’

‘I was going to introduce him to Harriet.’ I looked down.

‘Esther had it when we first met,’ Rob said.

‘What’s in your sack? It can’t be rice.’

‘It’s payment for the rice,’ he said with a smile.

I awoke to a commotion. Shrugging on a dressing robe, I slipped outside. A professor ushered me back towards my room.

‘What’s going on?’ She did not reply. ‘I’m her best friend.’

I pushed past her into Harriet’s room and turned on a police officer.

‘Have you taken her already? Where did she go?’

‘Miss Spring’s body has disappeared,’ he replied. ‘That is all I can say.’

Back in my room, for the first time since Harriet’s death, I began to cry. It struck me that Esther still had not materialised; perhaps she had found Rob. I now knew that I had to speak to the principal.

Katharine Stephen considered my confession from behind steepled hands.

‘I think Rob and Sebastian might be brothers,’ I said, only just realising it as I spoke. ‘I mean, Sebastian mentioned a twin but that would mean that Rob has aged very well.’

‘And you say that Esther is Rob’s niece?’

‘You don’t mean you think that Esther could be Sebastian’s...?’

‘It’s possible,’ the principal said. ‘And if she were Harriet’s that would explain why she disappeared when Harriet died... she would simply never have existed.’

Friday. 7pm. The Pickerel Inn. The plan was to deposit fake money and monitor whomever appeared to collect it. Ten minutes before closing, nobody had arrived. The note had been a decoy, distracting the police to give the real villain time to escape. It must have been someone who was already in Newnham, or who had an accomplice in Newnham. I entered the pub and asked to use their telephone. Ringing the porters’ lodge, I asked if any students had signed out that evening, or in the past couple of days. None. And there had been no registered visitors on Tuesday morning. No registered visitors. But there had been two unregistered visitors. I dropped the phone, jumped onto my bike and raced back to Newnham.

When I got back to my room, I found this note:

Dear Miss Painter -

It was I who killed Harriet. My target was Esther but should she have died when accompanied only by me, my guilt would have been obvious so I decided to make her disappear altogether. Since she never existed I could not take her body so I took the closest thing I had... her mother's. I do not kill out of malevolence or at random. I acquire only the cadavers Dr Longstaff asks of me. I did not wish for Harriet to die.

There was no name at the bottom of the note but when I upended the envelope, into my hands fell three grains of rice.

Estera Ulrich-Oltean

This poem was awarded second prize in the 'Newnham Daggerettes' short-story competition 2022.